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SUBJECT: DOWN BUT HARDLY OUT: ISCI 2008 ELECTION PROSPECTS

REF: A. HILLAH 000007

1B. HILLAH 000174

1C. HILLAH 000006

1D. BAGHDAD 00230

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a joint southern PRT, REO, ePRT and Baghdad POL reporting cable.

12. (C) Summary: Public opinion is turning against the religious parties, including Da'wa, ISCI, and the Sadr Trend, throughout the south. This reflects widespread disappointment with the performance and corruption of the provincial governments, a backlash against violence linked to Shi'a militias, and the perception that the religious parties are beholden to Iran. ISCI also risks losing further popular support for its outspoken stance on regions formation. However, the political realities of Iraq will likely prevent this shift in public opinion from translating into real political change in the south. Although ISCI will struggle to maintain its current level of political control, the religious parties are likely to maintain their dominance of provincial politics. The election prospects of the Sadr Trend will be reported septel. End Summary.

ISCI's current political strength

13. (C) ISCI emerged as the clear winner in the 2005 provincial elections and is the dominant political party of the south. ISCI currently holds a majority of seats in Babil, Diwaniyah, Karbala, and Najaf and a significant number of seats in Dhi Qar and Muthanna. Five governors (Babil, Diwaniyah, Muthanna, Najaf, Dhi Qar) are also ISCI members. However, ISCI will struggle to maintain this current level of political power due to a public backlash against religious parties arising from discontent with the provincial and national government, its ties to the Badr Corps and Iran, and its outspoken advocacy of a nine-governorate region in the south.

Discontent with provincial, national government

14. (C) Corruption and poor governance are seen by many southern Iraqis as the single greatest problems facing the country. Most provincial governments are run and staffed by people with little administrative or budgetary experience, and the public frequently complains of government failures in service delivery, job creation, and economic development. As the party with the most political power in the south, ISCI stands to lose the most from this public discontent. Even in governorates controlled by other parties, ISCI could still suffer a backlash due to its close association with the national government. The single exception to these challenges is probably ISCI's spiritual and political capital of Najaf. Najaf Governor Asad al-Ta'ie (ISCI) has the

support of the ISCI-controlled PC and is regarded as an able politician.

Ties to Badr, Iran

¶15. (C) With some exceptions Badr has been able to integrate itself into the police forces, and in many southern governorates Badr is synonymous with the IP. Muthanna provides a good example: ISCI PC Chair Abdul Hussein al-Dhalami is also the chief commander of the local Badr corps. Badr members are also present in various security organs, including the Criminal Investigative Unit (CIU), the TSU, and the Mustafa Groups (district-level tribal shock

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troops led by IP commanders). However, links to Badr could hurt ISCI candidates in other governorates. Despite the success of "Operation Lion's Leap," contacts in Diwaniyah have expressed concern over Badr's growing influence and recent procurement of T-72 tanks from unknown sources (reftel A). In Babil, public perception of an ISCI/Badr link in the assassination of IP Chief Gen. Qais has increased public protests against the governor as well as ISCI/Badr and benefited their political opponents (reftel B). Finally, ISCI is widely perceived as the Iraqi party most beholden to Iran, and this perception could hurt its electoral chances among nationalist voters in the south.

Region Formation

¶16. (C) The upcoming debate over regions formation could also impact ISCI's electoral chances. (Note: The 2006 Regions Formation Law goes into effect in April 2008. End Note.) ISCI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim has repeatedly and publicly

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called for the formation of a nine-governorate region in the south. In a recent meeting with the Babil governor and PC members, Hakim told them to "do whatever is possible" to secure the two-thirds vote in the PC necessary for region formation (reftel C). We do not know but assume similar meetings have taken place between Hakim and ISCI provincial leaders in other governorates. There is not a large degree of popular or political support for a nine-governorate region. Contacts indicate that Basrah, Maysan, and Dhi Qar are considering forming their own region, while the Sadrists consider "federalism" to be a malign American concept and oppose regions formation as a first step to partition. Continuing to back the nine-governorate region could cost ISCI further popular support, particularly if the debate over regions formation becomes especially acrimonious or violent.

ISCI responds

¶17. (C) ISCI leadership is already taking steps to address the challenges outlined above. ISCI leaders, including Mohammed al-Mawla, have called for a public education campaign on regions formation and repeatedly denied they wish to "impose" federalism on Iraq. ISCI renamed both itself (taking out the "revolution" from Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Badr Organization (instead of the more martial Badr Corps) to emphasize its transition from a spiritual and military resistance movement into an established political party. ISCI is also courting the Sunni tribal movement Sahwa al-Iraq (SAI) in the hopes of finding a Sunni ally to refute accusations of sectarianism or ties to Iran (reftel D). Until now these actions do not appear to have succeeded in altering the public's perception of ISCI.

Impact of Iraq's political realities

¶18. (C) Iraq's political realities will likely blunt the

impact of the decrease in popular support for religious parties. First, independent candidates lack the organizational strength and name recognition of the religious parties. Second, the current government is responsible for drafting the elections law. It remains to be seen whether the government will acquiesce to any open-list system that could threaten their power base. Third, ISCI/Badr will use its control over government institutions and religious endowments to shore up support before the election. Finally, Badr gunmen will likely intimidate both voters and opposition candidates in the run-up to any elections.

Comment: Significant Change Unlikely

¶9. (C) Comment: Absent the sudden emergence of strong independent parties, the political realities of southern politics will likely blunt the impact of the public turn against ISCI and other religious parties. Although the political balance of the south might shift slightly, the religious parties are likely to maintain their dominance of provincial politics. It remains unlikely that any one Shi'a party -- including ISCI or the Sadr Trend -- will sweep the south. End Comment.

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